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AND THE WORD OF GOD GREW AND MULTIPLIED

ANDREWS EMPLOYEE TRANSLATES BIBLE
INTO HIS NATIVE LANGUAGE

BY SAMANTHA SNIVELY

Go into all the world, Jesus said (Mark 16:15 NIV). Often, spreading the Word to new corners of the world means having the Word to spread. For Wöl Bol Wöl, an employee at Andrews University's Dining Services, this meant translating the Bible into his own language of Dinka.

Wöl is from South Sudan, and lived as a refugee for nine years before arriving at Oakwood University in 2003. The translation project, he said, "arose from a need to understand the Word of God in my own language." One or two partial New Testament translations in Dinka exist, but they are neither complete nor very good. At Oakwood, Wöl contacted several Bible societies to arrange for a translation, but with no success — until professor Anthony Hall suggested he do the translation himself. All the resources he needed to start were available to him — a library full of biblical references, computers, and professors willing to help him.

"I remember, I started on a floppy disk," he grins. Wöl started translating in 2004, and continued translating through his undergraduate degree and acceptance into the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University.

In the Seminary, Wöl began to learn Greek and Hebrew, and these languages influenced his translation. Previously, he translated from only English versions of the Bible,



Wöl Bol Wöl has completed the first draft of the Dinka Bible, and currently is in the process of editing it and refining the translation.

although he compared many versions to find the best way to express a thought. Wöl is translating the Bible into Rek, the standard variety of Dinka and the language he speaks.

Translation has its problems, and Wöl, like many translators, had the most difficulty when trying to express English concepts in his native language. The common expression, "the ends of the Earth," literally translates in Dinka, "the world is coming to an end," which is not quite the same message. Compass directions are also different — where English speakers orient north and give all directions accordingly, speakers of Dinka orient to what we would call the west, and give their directions as left, right and behind.

Wöl also had some trouble when a word didn't exist in Dinka for very biblical words, such as "holy." Original Dinka has no word for "holy." Wöl relates that when missionaries came through Sudan, they taught the Dinka to say "santo," from the Latin root. Wöl used this adopted word until he found that another variety of Dinka actually has a word for "holy," and then chose to use the Dinka word.

A good student of biblical scholarship but also anxious to complete the project, Wöl struggled with “the idea of not putting my own thoughts into the Bible, but rather expressing the Bible in my own language,” he says. Wöl combated this by comparing numerous versions of the Bible against each other to find commonalities of expression — not just English versions, either. As his language skills grew, he began using Hebrew and Greek versions, slowly adding Spanish and Chinese translations as he learned those languages as well. The Chinese versions were particularly helpful as he translated, as they express entire thoughts more than single words. Comparing all these versions helps him focus his words rather than confuse them: “When I go back and translate [into Dinka], I find I’m more confident in what I’ve translated because I have checked with other languages to see how they express the thought or verse,” he says.

How many languages does Wöl know? Well, he speaks eight, “plus the biblical languages,” he adds with a smile. In addition to English, Swahili and Dinka, he’s also mastered Spanish, Chinese, French, Italian and a few others. “And I’m learning Korean,” he adds.

Wöl has finished a complete first draft of the Dinka Bible and currently is in the process of editing it and refining the translation. That process requires “lots of checking and double-checking” with biblical scholars and Dinka speakers, says Wöl. He has tested out a spoken version of the first chapter of Genesis with Dinka speakers, and so far it has been well received. “They keep saying, ‘It’s very good, but when is it going to be finished?’” says Wöl. He is looking

for a sponsor to help with publishing costs — so far, he has funded nearly the entire translation project himself, and hopes that it will be completed within two years.

The past nine years have shown Wöl the value of grassroots efforts in spreading the Gospel. “The Bible will reach out in a way that I would never be able to,” he says. “I cannot reach every Dinka and tell them what God says, but the Word will reach them.”

Find out more about the project and how you can get involved at <http://www.dinkabible.org>.

THE TRANSLATION PROJECT, HE SAID, “AROSE FROM A NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE WORD OF GOD IN MY OWN LANGUAGE.”

Photos by Darren Heston

